

DHAKA MONDAY FEBRUARY 23, 2009

BASIC EDUCATION

Broken promises or
silverlining in the cloud?

RASHEDA K. CHOUDHURY

BANGLADESH has made visible progress in expanding access to schooling during the last two decades. The gross primary enrollment rate, which was 61 percent in 1980, increased to 72 percent by 1990 and to 98 percent by 2006. The net primary enrollment rate, as estimated from household survey data, is close to 90 percent. However, as found from micro level evidence, there are large regional variations in the net primary enrollment rate. As with the net primary enrollment rate, the primary completion rate (national average being 67 percent) also varies significantly across regions. Targeting schooling interventions to these regions has proved to be an effective tool to reduce the out-of-school child population.

It has been evident that those who do not enroll in school or do not complete primary education are largely the poor and other disadvantaged groups. Children with disabilities, ethnic and linguistic minorities, children from female-headed households, from inaccessible and remote locations, street children, and those engaged in child labour belong to these categories.

On average, about two-thirds of the students in primary school are present in classes. Intermittent and irregular attendance is a widespread and commonly accepted practice. Besides open exclusion of children who do not enroll or drop out, silent or "virtual exclusion" - children who are nominally enrolled in school, but who attend classes irregularly and do not learn anything is a serious problem that remains unquantified and uninvestigated. "Flexible school calendar", introduced by the last Caretaker Government to facilitate adjustment of school calendar in accordance with local needs situations like disasters, harvesting reasons etc., is expected to increase school attendance rate particularly in remote, inaccessible and tribal areas.

Diverse delivery modes exist both in primary and secondary education. At least 11 types of primary schools are officially listed. However, the official statistics do not include NGO run non-formal primary education even through they follow government curricular objectives and serve 1.5 million children who may otherwise be deprived of primary education. Similarly, different types of provisions in secondary education general Bangla medium schools, Madrashes, vocational/technical institutions, and different types of private English medium schools lack a common unified approach to curricular standards and quality of educational provisions and outcomes, thus reinforcing already existing divisions and inequities in society.

Per student public expenditure in



Bangladesh is one of the lowest in the world, ranging from US\$ 30 to 50 per student per year at both primary (including stipends and free textbooks) and a little higher at secondary levels. This level of public expenditure is never adequate to ensure acceptable quality. Moreover, there are concerns whether the existing resources are used for the right purpose and used efficiently.

At the secondary level, although about half of the children are yet to be enrolled, the expansion has been quite remarkable over the last decade. However, this expansion has not kept pace with the overall output from the system. Eighty percent of the children starting class VI do not pass SSC examination (BU-IED, Access to Education in Bangladesh, 2007).

Less than two percent of students are enrolled in formal vocational technical education after grade VIII. However, these institutions have low completion rates and the graduates are not in great demand in the employment market due to very traditionally oriented system of delivery and lack of demand based courses.

Governance has always been a major area of concern in the education sector. Membership of school management committees is rife with politics and teacher recruitment is often subject to influence from politicians, local elites and other vested interest groups. For the first time in the post liberation period, there has been "no corruption", as discovered by TIB, in teacher recruitment at the primary level during the last Caretaker Government's time (2007-'08)". This should be allowed to continue, without any undue influence for ensuring good governance and

quality teaching learning. Teacher absenteeism, although decreased over the last few years, has been a negative phenomenon with teachers placing much greater emphasis on private tutoring than on teaching at schools. There have been numerous textbook production and procurement problems almost every year, with books that are supposed to be distributed for free showing up for sale in the markets. These governance problems contribute to the poor quality of education in Bangladesh, and undermine the gains made in expanding access particularly in reaching out to girls. Thanks to the parents, teachers and pro-girl child policy of successive governments. Bangladesh, despite being the so-called "poor, least developed country", has already achieved gender - parity at the primary and secondary levels.

The rate of adult literacy in the population has always remained as a contentious issue. The continuing debate about the baseline for literacy level and appropriate definition and measurement of literacy skills have not been resolved. However, independent research suggests that there has been insignificant progress in literacy level in the years since 2000. Moreover, there remains a wide gap between literacy levels for rural and urban populations and for men and women.

Quality of education has become "the major issue" at all levels of education. The low quality of education provision at majority of public institutions and indiscriminate commercialization by many private providers have created a "quality divide" between the rich and the poor and the rural and urban popu-

lations. Education, instead of becoming an "equalizer", is increasingly becoming an instrument of inequality.

The recent National Election and the unprecedented victory of the Awami League led Grand Alliance has opened up new opportunities for moving forward with a vision of "Digital Bangladesh" to be achieved before the country reaches its 50th year in 2021. The Election Manifesto of the winning party has clearly spelt out time-bound targets of reaching universal primary enrolment by 2011 and an "Illiteracy free" Bangladesh by 2017. These are definitely ambitious goals considering the complex, multiple socio-economic, cultural and systemic constraints associated with public and private provisions for basic education in the country. Education still remains as a "Fundamental Principle" in our Constitution. The ruling party, with its huge majority in the Parliament, should consider enacting the "Right to Education Act" following the example of other countries like India that has done it in the recent past.

A "Permanent Education Commission" with the mandate and authority to continuously and consistently reviewing the gaps and challenges in all the sub-sectors of education is the need of the hour. The ruling party has already committed to institute a "Service Commission" for teachers that are expected to review the long felt demands of teachers for better benefit package and to suggest pragmatic ways of their professional development that can never be over empha-

sized.

Any of these measures including quality provision for teaching-learning would require significant increase in investment in public basic education, but failure to do so will be even more costly. Non-enrollment and high dropout mean high costs, while the benefits of education to society and individuals are much reduced when effective learning does not take place.

"Quality Education for All" should never be conceived as a slogan only, achieving it is not an impossible task either. It can definitely be achieved when all teachers are trained, supported and paid; when every classroom has enough learner friendly textbooks, desks and learning materials; when schools provide a safe and welcoming environment and communities have a say in decision making. The recently elected Upazila Parishad and other local level public representatives could be the facilitators for this process of change for achieving quality education. But they must be given the authority and the resources to make this happen. Above all, it can be achieved when government and civil society build a strong political commitment to the idea of good quality public education for everyone, and take specific steps to improve school conditions in the unserved, underserved, poorest communities and for girls and other disadvantaged groups. Is Bangladesh ready to take that step and move forward to achieve the "Vision 2021"? Or will these remain as lofty goals, only to be used for shifting the goal post further?

Rasheda K. Choudhury is Former Adviser to Caretaker Government.

Education policy?

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sectors. The matter that is hardly discussed is that of resources-human and financial. The Bangla daily Naya Diganto carried a headline report on the financial requirement of Tk.60,000 crore if the education policy of the last AL government is implemented now by the new AL government. (Feb 6). At the end of the report two development economists

from DU gave their reactions to such an idea. They raised doubts if spending money on bricks and mortar was at all necessary to bring about changes in primary and secondary education now. The government must emphasise soft resources first. Classes can be held in double shifts and even under trees or in some homes in the locality. What is needed is massive investment in recruitment

of large number of teachers, training of teachers and equipment to bring about improvements quickly and on a lasting basis.

As we discuss the policy parameters on education, it seems the financial burden will pose a threat to implementation. Let us take the case of primary education first. We have seen many dignitaries from other countries, from India in particular,

coming to Bangladesh to study the BRAC program in primary education. What are the requirements in money and teachers if we want the BRAC system to gradually replace the traditional one over the next five years? The caretaker government wanted some limited supervision by BRAC personnel in primary schools on a pilot basis. This was opposed by the teachers' community and the idea

came to naught. Can the elected government take up the matter and see what is needed to put the pilot project into practice in selected areas? Let us go for small changes at the primary level now.

M. Shamsul Haque is Professor and Vice Chancellor, Northern University Bangladesh.